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# DEFENSE INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT



(U) Attitudes of Kurds,  
Shia, and Sunnis in a  
Post-Saddam Iraq

Derived from Multiple Sources  
Declassify on: OADR

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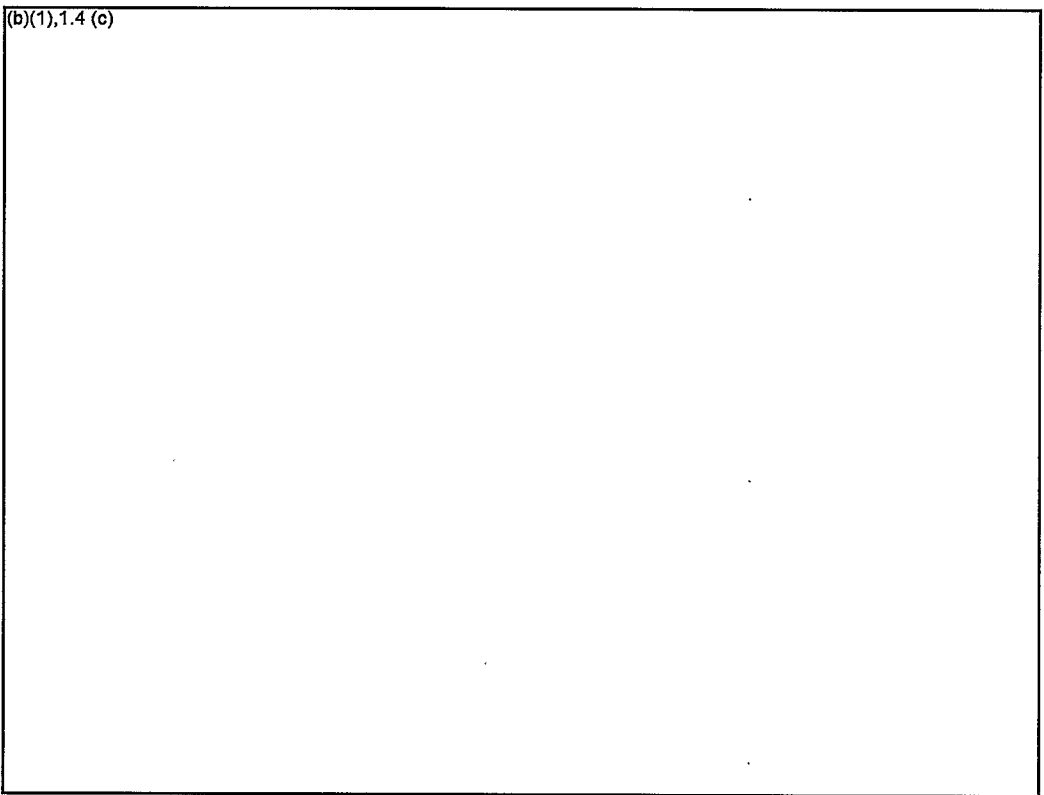
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## **(U) Attitudes of Kurds, Shia, and Sunnis in a Post-Saddam Iraq**

### **Key Judgments**

~~(S)~~ Assessing the basic attitudes of the three main ethnoreligious sectors in Iraq is fundamental to understanding the Iraqi political landscape following a successful Coalition overthrow of Saddam Husayn's regime.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c)



~~Information Cutoff Date: 26 February 2003~~

~~Derived from: Multiple Sources~~

~~Declassify on: X1, X6~~

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### Assumed Scenario: Coalition Victory

(S) For the purpose of this assessment, we assume the following factors hold true for a post-Saddam political-military environment:

- The regime has been overthrown as a result of a Coalition military operation and not a preemptive coup.
- An interim authority is in place and is complying with UN Security Council resolutions.
- The interim authority is committed to maintaining the country's territorial integrity.
- Deliberations on establishing a permanent representative government are ongoing.
- Coalition forces remain in Iraq, but the length of their stay has not been fixed.

### Intelligence Gaps on Iraqi Attitudes

(S) A large body of intelligence, press, and academic reports exist on Kurdish views regarding post-Saddam issues because the Kurdish-controlled area is no longer a closed society. Moreover, Iraqi Kurds have developed strong political parties, leaders, and news media. Some reports have surfaced on Iraqi Sunni opinion, based on interviews with travelers and other intelligence sources, but the climate of fear inside regime-controlled Iraq prevents most Sunnis from expressing their true opinion on political matters. Few detailed, current reports exist on Shia opinion, since Shia rarely travel outside the country and live under even greater repression than Sunnis. However, well-known sociodemographic factors and historical patterns strongly suggest some general trends in Shia thinking and behavior post-Saddam:

### The Kurds: Making the Most of Their Gains

(S) The Kurds will (b)(1), 1.4 (c) have made toward obtaining greater autonomy and a better standard of living since the

1991 departure of Iraqi forces from most of their region.

- The Kurds are the only Iraqi ethnoreligious group to have developed independent government structures, strong political parties, and standing militias.
- The UN oil-for-food program has improved humanitarian conditions in the area under Kurdish rule to a greater degree than in regime-controlled Iraq.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

"We Kurds have never had it so good."

(S)

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

- During Kurdish deliberations last year over a draft national constitution for Iraq, the main parties supported the formation of two ethnically defined federal regions—one Kurdish and one Arab.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c)

- One large, ethnically defined Kurdish province would give the Kurds greater power than in a federal system based on the current 18 Iraqi governorates.

(S//NF)

(b)(1), 1.4 (c)

- The draft Iraqi constitution that Kurdish politicians crafted last year designated Kirkuk as the capital of

a future Kurdish province, according to [redacted]

(b)(1),1.4 (c),1.4 (d)

- After Saddam's defeat in Kuwait in 1991, a popular revolt broke out, resulting in brief Kurdish control of the major cities of the north, including Kirkuk, before the regime put down the uprising. Regime forces later withdrew from much of Iraq under Coalition pressure but retained control of Kirkuk, Mosul, and the oilfields.

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

- ~~(S//NF)~~ Senior Kurdish leaders have said that they would be unhappy with a long foreign military occupation of Iraq after Saddam's ouster and that they do not want the form of the new Iraqi government to be dictated by foreigners.

(b)(1),1.4 (c),1.4 (d)

### Will There Be Civil War?

~~(S)~~

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

The geographic separation of the various groups in most of Iraq will mitigate the prospects for civil war. Most of Iraq's Sunni Arabs reside in central Iraq, away from large concentrations of Shia or Kurds. Most Shia reside in southern Iraq, and most Kurds live in the north. Barring mass casualties or widespread displacement among members of any one group, these demographic factors are likely to remain constant. The existence of established contacts between Sunni and Shia branches of major Arab tribes also may help reduce tension. Moreover, Iraq has little experience with intracommunal strife similar to that which has plagued Algeria, Egypt, Israel, and Lebanon. The greatest chances for sectarian and ethnic strife exist in cities like Baghdad, where Shia make up an estimated 75 percent of the population, or in the Kirkuk-Mosul region, where the regime's policy of forced Arabization has created serious Kurdish-Arab grievances.

~~(S//NF)~~

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

- Senior Kurdish leaders recently made public statements indicating they would resist Turkish military intervention.

### Shia Arabs: Settling the Score

- ~~(S)~~ Following Saddam's demise, the first instinct of many Shia will be to [redacted]

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

Past unrest broke out when the regime appeared weakened or in response to particularly outrageous acts of regime repression.

- In March 1991, following the Iraqi defeat in Kuwait, a popular uprising broke out among the Shia throughout the south, but government forces soon crushed it.
- In February 1999, the government's reported killing of an important Shia cleric sparked widespread unrest in parts of southern Iraq and in the Shia slums of Baghdad. These events followed December 1998's Operation DESERT FOX, the largest US military strike against Iraq since the Gulf War, which may have made the regime appear somewhat weakened.

~~(S)~~

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

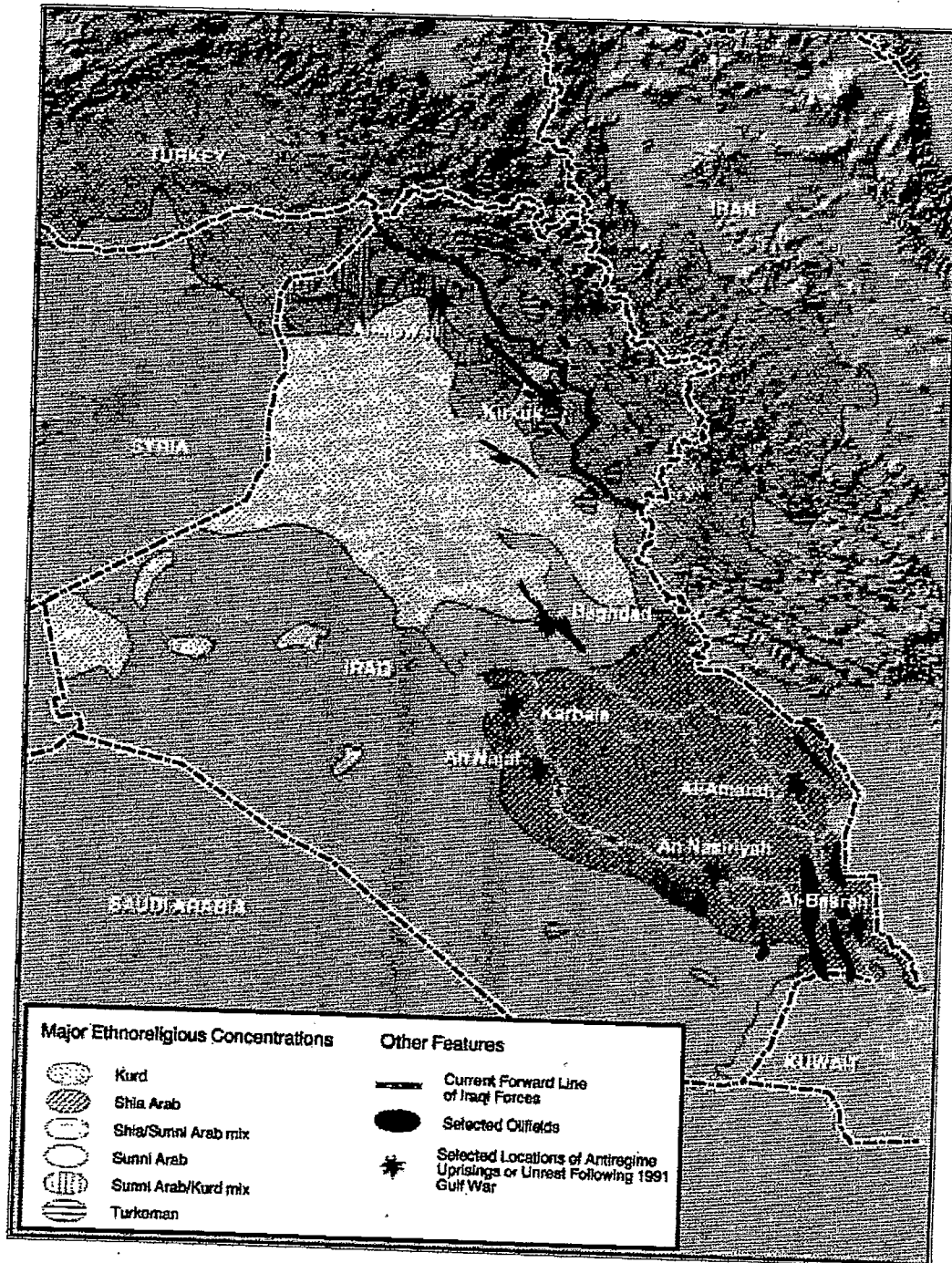


Figure 1. (U) Major Ethnoreligious Concentrations, Scenes of Uprisings or Unrest After 1991 Gulf War, and Selected Oilfields in Iraq.

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

- During the 1991 Shia uprising, the local population singled out Shia Baath Party officials as the main targets of retribution.

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

(S)

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

- Despite constituting about 60 percent of the overall Iraqi population, as well as occupying areas containing major oilfields and the country's only sea-ports, the Shia are a conspicuous underclass in Iraq.
- Shia regions and urban districts are much more depressed and underserved than Sunni-dominated areas.

(S)

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

- Although religion is an important element of Shia identity, Islam has been much less politicized among Shia in Iraq than in Iran.

### Radical Islam

(S) Radical Islam has been a persistent but marginal force in Iraq for more than 3 decades.

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

After the decimation of the Iraqi Communist Party in the 1960s and 1970s, the Islamic opposition became the most effective channel of ideological dissent for alienated Iraqis—especially those in the Shia community. Although Saddam ruthlessly suppressed the Islamic opposition, activists intermittently waged a guerrilla and terrorist campaign against the regime from the 1970s

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(b)(1),1.4 (c)

(S) Islam has emerged as a more prominent factor in the lives of ordinary Iraqi Sunnis amid the hardships of the last decade, but the trend does not necessarily equate to openness to radical Islamic activism. Radical Sunni Islamic groups, such as Ansar al-Islam, have become active in the Kurdish-controlled area, although their numbers are still small and they represent only a fringe element in Kurdish society.

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

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(b)(1),1.4 (c)

and they have grown up amid the privations resulting from Saddam's policies and sanctions—which many blame on US policies.

- Saddam has marginalized Shia clerics using extreme repressive measures, including intimidation, arrest, imprisonment, and execution — preventing them from playing any significant political role. (b)(1),1.4 (c)

- Even though the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) is the largest externally based Shia opposition group, Tehran's strong influence on it is a negative factor for most Iraqi Shia because they tend to dislike and distrust Iranians, (b)(1),1.4 (c)

### Sunni Arabs: Conflicted

(S)

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

- Despite their favored status in Saddam's Iraq, most Sunnis feel a deep hatred for the regime, (b)(1),1.4 (c)

(S)

(b)(1),1.4 (c),1.4 (d)

- Sunnis comprise about 20 percent of the overall population, compared with the Shia at about 60 percent and the Kurds at less than 20 percent.
- (b)(1),1.4 (c) have shown that despite the threat of losing their preferred status, many Sunnis appear open to the prospect of a more representative government, so long as their interests are fairly represented.

(S)

(b)(1),1.4 (c)

- Many Sunnis have expressed a desire to simply live in a peaceful country where they can make a living, and they generally are uninterested in the machina-

tions of local and international politics. (b)(1),1.4 (c)

- (b)(1),1.4 (c) the deciding factor in how Coalition forces are accepted in Iraq will be the number of civilian casualties inflicted during the war.
- A revolt by members of a prominent Sunni tribe against the government in 1995 following the regime's execution of one of their more notable members showed that, despite an inclination to be submissive, Sunnis are capable of violent resistance to central authority if provoked.

### The Complexity of Iraqi Ethnoreligious Groups

(S) Although assessing the mindset of Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds on basic issues is vital to understanding the future political dynamics of a post-Saddam Iraq, apparent patterns will not always apply. Each of Iraq's ethnoreligious groups is diverse, containing subgroups that have an array of perspectives. For instance, Sunni Arabs from Saddam's tribal base of Tikrit have interests that may be different from those of Sunnis in western Iraq or Mosul. Even among Tikritis, members of Saddam's tribe have concerns different from other Tikriti tribes or nontribal Tikritis.

(S) Ethnoreligious sectors can be further subdivided according to wealth, geographic location, and social status. Many Iraqis of each ethnoreligious sector have made accommodations with the regime to reap benefits, and these persons will have a greater sense of alienation and fear about their prospects in the post-Saddam order. Rural inhabitants will have substantially different interests from the residents of cities, regardless of their ethnoreligious background.

### Nonethnoreligious Interest Sectors

(S) In addition to ethnoreligious groups, Iraq has other, sometimes overlapping major interest sectors, including externally-based oppositionists, tribes, former and serving military officers, former regime

security personnel, former Baath Party officials, and the Shia religious scholars or *ulema*.

(S) **Externally Based Oppositionists.** This sector consists of more than 75 organizations claiming to represent Iraq's various ethnic, religious, sectarian, and ideological groups. Only a handful at present can realistically claim to have significant representation inside Iraq. At a large conference in London last December, the representatives of most Iraqi opposition groups agreed on a statement calling for the establishment of a post-Saddam transitional authority not to exceed 2 years, to be followed by a permanent government based on national elections and a new constitution. The oppositionists also endorsed a federal structure for the new government but did not go into details. They designated Islam as the state religion. The delegates expressed strong opposition to any foreign military occupation or externally imposed authority of any kind, but subsequent statements by some prominent opposition figures suggest a pragmatic acceptance of the need for Coalition forces to remain in Iraq for a limited period. Despite agreement on these issues, deliberations were often fractious and chaotic, reflecting a problematic historical trend in Iraqi opposition affairs.

(S)

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

Most Iraqis currently view externally based opposition figures with suspicion.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

(S) **Tribes.** A large percentage of the Iraqi population today—possibly the majority—identify with a tribe.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c)

Saddam has used a combination of fear and benefits to control tribal sheikhs, but he has never fully succeeded. The sheikhs appear flexible

about doing what is necessary to preserve their status and influence and, therefore,

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

(S) **Military Officers.** The predominantly Sunni Iraqi officer class has a long history of political activity and intrigue, although Saddam all but extinguished this tradition through a combination of repression and manipulation in order to establish and preserve his monopoly on power.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

The military is an historic Iraqi institution, and many Iraqis, particularly Sunnis, will maintain respect for the officer class, especially those who are not tainted by close association with Saddam.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

(S) **Regime Intelligence and Security Personnel.** One of the hallmarks of Saddam's tenure as Iraq's leader has been the development and prominence of the security apparatus. After coming to office in 1979, Saddam heavily politicized the security apparatus, shifting its focus from guarding national security and the Baath Party's primacy to defending his rule. The number and size of security organizations increased, and their leaders were drawn from Saddam's family and tribe and other loyal tribes. More important, the security apparatus—not the Baath Party—became the vehicle that kept Saddam in power. The Iraqi security apparatus consists of several hundred thousand personnel and, because of its size and prominence,

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

Former security officials, especially those associated with commercial enterprises,

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)



(S) **Former Baath Party Officials.** Although the development of Saddam's personality cult largely marginalized the Baath Party as Iraq's main political force, the party has remained a human resource pool from which Saddam draws administrative support. It also is an important cog in his security machine, overseeing security at the local level. With an estimated 700,000 members, the party is the largest armed force in Iraq. Even though cynicism and contempt for Saddam is rampant within the party, this body is still directly linked with Saddam's rule in the eyes of the general populace, which will remember the favors party officials enjoyed and the acts of repression in which they were directly or indirectly involved.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

but during the 1991 Shia uprising the local population mostly singled out Shia party officials as collaborators and generally showed more tolerance to Sunni party officials, who were more likely to be seen as just doing their jobs. In post-Saddam Iraq,

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

(S) **Shia Religious Scholars or Ulema.** This group is largely centered in Najaf or scattered in exile abroad. The *ulema* play an important formal role in the lives of Iraq's large Shia community, as well as an informal role providing guidance to their followers and resources to tribal leaders. Under Saddam, the Shia establishment has been substantially undercut.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

Some figures, such as SCIRI leader Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Hakim, are tied to the Iranians.

(b)(1), 1.4 (c), 1.4 (d)

Moreover, SCIRI officials have stated that the group no longer seeks to create an Islamic state in Iraq.

(U) Questions and comments may be addressed to

(b)(3):10 USC 424

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made significant contributions to this publication.

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